THE QUEST

August 23, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Matthew 13:44-52

"Again the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it." -Matthew 13:45,46(RSV)

Those great New Yorker cartoons go to the heart of of the human predicament with unerring accuracy. In one of them two aging tycoons are riding in the back seat of a limousine. They exude "success." They have accomplished in life what they set out to accomplish. A cemetery is visible through the window. One man says to the other: "Kind of takes some of the fun out of being rich doesn't it?"

Human beings are made, it seems, with the capacity to expect more than life offers, even in victory and success and accomplishment. We are most human in our impatience with the limits of our humanity. We are never better than when we are stretching high and probing deep, looking, seeking. Thus, "The Quest." Poets and artists and musicians and saints share the pursuit... for beauty, truth, meaning, for salvation.

Sometimes the quest is elegant and sometimes it is not so elegant...

"It doesn't get any better than this!" That's the tag line of a series of beer commercials which actually are marketing something far more profound... the dream, the holy grail of consumer society, the pearl of great price. A group of people are fishing, or riding swamp buggies, or white-water-rafting. It is high adventure: muscles are flexed, the water is frothy, the sky a brilliant blue accented by the careful prism splashes on the lense of the camera. And then evening comes. The steaks, or the fish, are thrown on the open fire, a gorgeous sunset decorates the sky, the holy elements are distributed and opened with the familiar hiss of the flip top and the words of the institution come resonant and clear... "It doesn't get any better than this."

Is that it? Is that what the Quest is about? Is the Pearl of Great Price those wonderfully luminous moments of pure physical/sensual ecstasy when we are one with the world, and our friends, and we know that it just doesn't get any better?

For the less vigorous perhaps it is the quasi immortality promised by the insurance company whose commercials used to alternately drown you, lay you out in the emergency room, call you home by way of the stairway to the sky... then show what an irresponsible oaf you've been because now your kids can't go to college - and then, miraculously give your life back, this time full of responsible prudence and resolve - to buy more life insurance. Is the security of your loved ones the pearl of great price for which you would do anything?

Or is it simply - money?

The cover story in the July 6 edition of Fortune is "The Money Society." "Money, money, money is the incantation of today. Americans are bewitched by an epidemic of money enchantment... Under the blazing sun of money, all other values shine palely." The modern hero, says the article, is "the honcho with the condo and the limo and the Miro and lots and lots of dough." The article contained what I thought was an altogether sad revelation... "An overwhelming 93% of recently surveyed teen-age girls deemed shopping their favorite past-time, way ahead of sixth place dating." [Fortune, July 6, 1987, "The Money Society," Myron Magnet].

What is the objective for which you would do anything? It's a fascinating question and it is amusing to play with it a bit. It is also a very important question. Jesus posed it one time by way of a series of playful, colorful stories, the point of which is altogether serious.

I love the scene - the beach in the early evening, the sun is setting, the gentle rocking of the fishing boats makes a quiet slapping sound in the water. Jesus is sitting in a boat, just a few yards out in the lake, A crowd is standing on shore listening: some are down on their haunches, a man picks up a hand full of sand and lets it trickle through his fingers; a few are lying back, looking up at the exquisite color of blue in the sky, just a few shades from purple, accented by an occasional mountain of white clouds. For some people, just being there like that, in that picture, is a pretty good object for the quest.

What Jesus says in that setting is intriguing, almost curious. The topic is not the ethical imperatives for which he has become famous... "You have heard that it was said... but I say to you." The topic is the Kingdom. The Kingdom of God is like this - a sower, sowing seeds; yeast, a mustard seed. They are so intrigued they follow him after he is done teaching... "Say some more about that, Jesus..." and what he says by way of explanation comes in two brief fascinating comparisons -

"The kingdom is like treasure hidden in a field which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys the field." That's a very peculiar story.

In my formative years, returning something which did not belong to me was held up as an important ethical ideal. It was part of a strong respect for the property of others..., bordering on reverence which children of the Great Depression (and adults) - all seem to have. If you found money, someone's wallet, for instance, you were expected to knock yourself out to locate the person who lost it. You certainly didn't hide it and come back

later to retrieve it. So, by my family's standards, this man is a scoundrel. He stubs his toe on a box of money, quickly covers it up. And then, does he hustle downtown to ask who buried the gold out on the back forty? No... this fellow rushes home, gets the bank books out of the drawer, savings bonds - a few C.D.'s, withdraws everything he has saved, hurries on over to the realtor and sells his house, then drops his car off at the used auto lot and now, fully liquidated, makes an offer the owner can't refuse on the field in which the treasure is buried.

Someone (I think it was Frederick Buchener) in retelling the story, made it even more amusing by wondering if the man had a wife, and what she was saying as he is selling her home out from under her on one of his "get-rich schemes."

What this man has found is so valuable that its quest calls for the suspension of common morality.

My hunch is that Jesus intentionally told a story that was slightly out of sync... with a bit of shock value. There is something in life which is infinitely valuable, he was saying. "It is here, in your midst. Nothing in life compares to it. It is God's Kingdom." And in the thrall of this charming scoundrel who secretively buys the field - Jesus has them listening carefully and says...

"It is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it."

We're a little more comfortable with this fellow here in Chicago on North Michigan Avenue. He's a broker. If the first man is a dirt farmer in a John Steinbeck novel who sells all his possessions to buy a field under which he has a hunch there lies an oil well, this one is a pin-striped, wing-tip shoes, button-down collar, regimented tie, broker for E. F. Hutton. When E. F. Hutton speaks everybody listens. And when pearl merchants sell all they have for one pearl, everybody sits up and takes notice.

The sense of this story is that the merchant is dealing in something more than commercial value, that his search for "fine pearls" has something of "The Quest" in it. I see him as a connoisseur, a lover of beauty with a finely cultivated aesthetic taste. Trading in pearls is the way he finances his real passion... his true vocation... the quest for something so good, so beautiful, so valuable, he will sell anything to own it. Unlike his agrarian counterpart who stumbles on his treasure this man has invested his life in the pursuit of something represented by the one, perfect pearl. When he sees it he knows immediately - and he must and will have it.

Now at this point in the sermon it is customary for the preacher to ask the congregation what - for you - is the pearl of great price. For what would you, some day in the future sell all? The exercise of answering that can be amusing and safely remote.

I should like this morning to invert that process. I'm going to make an assumption about you - because I know its truth in my own life. My

assumption is that we are already doing it... that you and I are already mortgaging and encumbering our lives, our futures. We could, of course, sit around after dinner over coffee and discuss the matter of infinite value and what we'd do to get it. But my assumption is that we are already selling in pursuit of something; that this quest is very much underway.

Jesus' brilliant little story invites us to consider the possibility that somewhere along the line we decided what the pearl of great price was and have been in its pursuit ever since.

We do work hard at financial security. The theologians suggest that, like the two tycoons passing the cemetery, the compulsive-accumulation-mentality, has in it something of eternal aspiration - that we assume having lots of money is at least a leading candidate for the pearl of great value.

Winning is certainly an ultimate objective for which significant sacrifice is made. The National Collegiate Athletic Association has a major problem on its hands. The universities whose athletic programs it is responsible for monitoring and regulating have allowed an entire system to grow up within higher-education, an academic counter culture whose simple goal is to win. Winning is the supreme value... the pearl of great price.

Closer to home for many of us and more modest, less dramatic and more complex, by far... we work hard at excellence, at being good at what we do professionally. We are willing to make sacrifices for this. The pearl of great price is not simply to succeed but to do what we do with commitment, dedication, discipline and excellence... to be good business people, physicians, lawyers, parents, clerks and clergy. Thank God for scientists and educators and politicians and artists who pursue their objectives with single-minded intensity. That's how we get great music and peace in the world and a cure for cancer. And yet - for everyone of us there is a point at which our professional and vocational goals begin to look like the holy grail and our commitment to them like a religious quest. The setting is usually fairly modest. It is our life - our vocation - our family - our relationship. We do, most of us, make sacrifices here and they are tough and complex. We do, for instance, forgo leisure time in this quest. We do sacrifice time with precious people in order to stay on the job one more hour, one more call, one more brief, one more sale. And although it is neither evil, nor entirely conscious, it in fact represents the quest we are already on, and in it is a value for which we are already selling some of what we have and what we are - and it just may be, I think Jesus wants us to see - that what we are selling may be more valuable than the object of the quest for which we are selling it.

In this story, the act of seizing the Kingdom seems to be the point. But there is also the pearl... and it may be that Jesus wanted his hearers to think about that pearl... that symbol of perfect beauty, that object of infinite value, which all of human history regards with romance and mystery. Reflect on the fact that the object of beauty and value is always without exception, the product of an irritant. The object to which Jesus compared the Kingdom of God occurs in the first place because a tiny grain of sand lodges in an oyster shell and causes an irritation. The oyster

creates this beautiful and infinitely valuable pearl as it copes with an irritation.

The simple fact is that most of the significant growing any of us has done was in response to irritation. You and I have grown when someone or something irritated us. Consider the possibility that the best education is the process of planting small irritants, questions, doubts, in safe, secure places and then watching the magnificent process of coping with and growing around the irritant. And consider the distinct possibility that what this is all about is your own spiritual pilgrimage.

And now, if you will, let all of that into your life. Let it remind you of the irritants in the past that forced you to grow; the people who loved you enough to want you to grow; loved you enough, that is to say, to irritate you.

And let it remind you of the irritants that are causing you to grow now - in your vocation, in your intellectual life, in your relationships - and in your spiritual pilgrimage and allow for the possibility that something of that is what God's Kingdom is like.

When the merchant found the pearl - he sold all that he had and bought it. Jesus said there is an ultimate good, an infinitely precious gem to possess which anyone would be happy to sell all. He called it the Kingdom.

It is not a place. It is what we, all of us, are looking for - pearl merchant, those folks sitting by the lakeside listening to him talk, and you and me. Jesus proposed that the object of the human quest is not wealth, physical pleasure, winning or professional excellence. It is something called the Kingdom of God.

And that... God's Kingdom... is not a place. It's a condition. It is God actually reigning. The Kingdom of God is when and where life is lived within God's love and justice and joy and hope. The Kingdom of God is when and where life overcomes death, compassion overcomes cruelty, beauty is valued more than ugliness, when justice replaces injustice.

It is not always a big deal by the world's standards. According to Jesus, it is more often than not, hidden, inconspicuous. It breaks into the ordinary life of the world like a thief in the night. It grows silently within the ordinary life of the world like yeast working in bread.

Sometimes the Kingdom of God is so thoroughly hidden in the life of the world that we stumble over it quite by accident...

You're going along your merry way, doing what you do in life, getting up in the morning, drinking coffee, going to work, paying the bills, watching TV, and suddenly you stumble over... love, beauty, justice, intimacy, hope - God's Kingdom!

You have about concluded that people are so utterly selfish that the human prospect is utterly grim... and you read about a fireman who waded into a roaring inferno on the twentieth floor to bring a baby out.

Or you've thought all day about ugliness - about abused children and drugs and poverty and entrenched racism and now AIDS, and without warning Samuel Barber's "Adagio for Strings" breaks in with such passionate beauty your eyes fill.

Or you've about concluded that no one in this world cares enough to understand you, or understands you enough really to care - that it's you against the world and you'd better learn to be tough - and without warning someone does, someone actually reaches into your life and holds your hand, or holds you.

Or in the midst of a political malaise in which by-passing our magnificent constitutional system of government - for which so many have lived and died is celebrated, and in which lying is called heroic and systematically deceiving not only the people but the people's elected representatives - is called patriotism... in the middle of this malaise - someone has the courage to say what must be said, to call us back to sanity by telling the truth.

When the Kingdom of God happens, said Jesus; when love, justice, intimacy, hope, redemption... break into the ordinary life of the world, drop what you are doing and jump into it, or at least stand there with a lump in your throat and tears in your eyes and cheer. "Sell all you have and buy the field!"

And sometimes the Kingdom comes because you've been looking for it. It has been your quest all along. And although you have not always been certain about what the object of your quest looks like... in fact, you may never have thought of it as a spiritual quest and would never have used religious language to describe it - you know when you see it, or hear it, or feel it, or receive it, because you have been looking for it so long.

The Quest... To be a Christian... is to allow Jesus the Christ to define its object. That's one of the ways to tell a Christian. Jesus does the defining. He called it the Kingdom.

One time a man lived out his life as an expression of God's love. He taught its meaning and ideals, he lived them out, he expressed them in the way he related to people...

In the way he lived and died he embodied a new and blessed Kingdom in the middle of life... A bit of it was there, in their midst. One time when he sat in a boat, with the sun setting and the waves gently slapping the hull...

Whatever else it is, it is when you live in that Kingdom - and one thing further... God's Kingdom is that place where you know yourself loved by God. Where - because you have known Jesus,... have listened to him, have heard his gracious word because you have actually lowered your guard and allowed yourself to be loved by him. In that you have known that you are loved by God... are a child of God... That is a very good place to be. It is the object of your quest.

If it were a buried treasure - you should buy the field.

If it were a pearl - you should do what you have to - to own it.

It is neither, or course. It is where there is life and beauty and justice and hope. It is where God is God, and where - in the very midst of life, you know yourself to be loved. It is what you have been looking for all your life.

When you find it... or stumble on it... or when it finds you... hold on to it for dear life.

Amen.

Praise be to you great God for the quest to which you call us.

Praise to you for that sense of incompleteness and dissatisfaction you have created in us.

Praise to you for the Kingdom for which we have been looking and which surprises us with love and beauty and justice and hope in the midst of the world.

Praise to you for Jesus, the story teller, who hid your truth in tales of buried treasure and pearls of great price, and who is himself, our Lord and our Christ.

Praise to you great God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.